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HEADING TO VIETNAM? THEN 'MEET ME AT JOE'S'

JOE SPRINGER-MILLER'S first visit to Vietnam in 1993 left him shaken. "I saw hunger, disease and people who were not allowed to do anything under a strict Soviet-era Communist regime. I'd never seen anything like it," he says via Skype from Mui Ne, Vietnam.

As he takes a late-evening break from work by the roaring South China Sea, a soft-lit, open-air café glows behind him, and the unhurried rhythm of an acoustic guitar mixes with the sound of crashing waves.

Springer-Miller, owner and operator of Joe's Café and Garden Resort (joescafeandgardenresort.com), seems to have found the perfect working holiday. Since he and his wife, Thao, started their business three years ago, the café has become a hub for live music, poetry readings, art exhibits and theatre, and the resort offers seaside bungalows and beautiful vistas. "Meet me at Joe's" is a popular refrain for backpackers, tourists and locals alike.

Just how did Springer-Miller, a native of Vermont, become a businessman in a far-away country that initially left him shaken? When he graduated from Furman in 1988 with a degree in drama, his plan was to become a broadcaster. So of course he wound up doing what many drama majors do — he went into sales.

But he soon itched for more. Taking the advice of a close friend, he packed all he owned, including his prized '65 Dodge Dart, into a storage facility (where it still resides 20 years later) and headed for central Japan to teach English with the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme. Thus began the journey that continues today.

Springer-Miller adapted quickly to life in Japan, learning the language, immersing himself in the culture and exploring music with a local band. He also began traveling extensively in Southeast Asia.

Early on, a trip to Cambodia and Vietnam — where he was advised to stay on the marked path for fear of land mines and unexploded ordnance — proved eye-opening. "I wanted to visit the remotest places I could," he says. "But I was shocked by what I saw, especially after living in ultra-modern Japan. In Vietnam, people



Joe Springer-Miller and family (inset) have established a niche with their seaside resort.

were eager to tell me their stories — and everyone had a story."

Until the late 1980s Vietnam was an isolated agricultural state, hostile to Western tourists. But with economic reforms and the establishment of diplomatic relations with the United States in 1995, Vietnam slowly began to welcome the international community.

In 1998 Springer-Miller returned to Vietnam, enchanted by the country's isolation, the people and the warm reception he had received there: "I got a sense of hope that change was on the horizon, and I was witnessing not only Vietnamese history but also my own." He kept going back, and each time, he says, he "saw evidence of more and more change, happening at an increasingly rapid pace."

He explored other areas — Thailand's beaches, Indonesia's rainforests, Nepal's mountains, Myanmar's abandoned temples — but decided that, after eight years in Japan, he would move to Vietnam. "I was growing stagnant," he says, "and I was ready to try something new to maintain that feeling of perpetual growth."

During his early years in Ho Chi Minh City he worked for the Korean Consular School, developing a bilingual program for Korean kids, and became a founding member of the Saigon Players, a nonprofit community theatre group whose mission is to "uphold the arts while giving to charity." The group is popular among English-speaking expatriates.

He met his wife, Thao Thanh Tran, while working on a Vietnamese film — he was her dialogue coach. With Thao, Springer-Miller hit the circuit again, touring Vietnam for three months by motorcycle. During their trip they fell in love with Mui Ne, a once modest coastal town that has blossomed into a popular tourist

destination. They left Mui Ne as travelers — but returned as entrepreneurs.

He says, "We took an old farmhouse, got the first 24-hour restaurant license in Vietnam, and literally removed the doors." Joe's Café was born — although, he says, "It was tough trying to do this in an area where locals had grown up in traditional fishing families. Our staff members were not familiar with the food or culture."

But the hard work paid off. The business has evolved into a seaside resort, and Springer-Miller and his family, including recent arrival Mason, have a front-row seat for Vietnam's transformation.

"Vietnam is changing so fast," he says. "When I first got to Saigon, it had two traffic stops. No one drove themselves. Now you see Lamborghinis."

Although economic progress has been swift and Vietnam has become a popular tourist destination, the Communist government still regulates commerce. "It's just so difficult to do business here, which adds to already challenging work," he says. "But Vietnam's dynamism is both what I love and what drives me crazy. I used to travel to different places to witness change, but now I live in one country and witness change every day."

While he still visits the United States, Springer-Miller has not lived in his home country since 1992. Occasionally he wonders what he's missed living abroad — but not for long. "Right now it's all about this place," he says. "Every morning I'm so excited. It's a whole new kind of travel."

— CHRISTOPHER BUNDY

The author, a 1988 graduate, teaches writing and literature at Savannah College of Art and Design in Atlanta. His first novel, Baby, You're a Rich Man, is forthcoming from C&R Press. Photos courtesy Joe Springer-Miller.